

Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 27 | Number 4

Article 10

12-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Houle, Tom (2007) "The Erik Wedmark letters," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 27 : No. 4 , Article 10.

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The Erik Wedmark letters

BY TOM HOULE

Erik Wedmark was a 25-year-old young man from the small village of Furuberg (Bjuråker parish) in Hälsingland province when he immigrated to the United States in 1858. He was born Erik Johansson Wedmark on February 4, 1833, the third of six children to Jonas Wedmark and Brita Eriksdotter Rolin. Erik was the only member of the family to immigrate to the United States until a younger sister, Anna, made the trip some 48 years later in 1900.

Erik's traveling companions on this trip included his 17-year-old cousin Pehr, and several other young people from Bjuråker parish. Records show the group sailed on the ship *Luleå* departing from Göteborg (Gothenburg) and arrived in New York City August 20, 1858.

One day following the *Luleå*'s arrival in the United States, Erik and his cousin wrote a letter to his older brother, Pehr, in Sweden. In the ensuing eight years Erik wrote several more letters to his brother and his parents. These letters, along with two written by his parents to Erik, were saved by descendants in Sweden and later made available to me while compiling a family genealogical history. Recently, the complete set of letters has been donated to the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, MN.

Translation of all letters were made by Scandinavian Translation Services, Minneapolis, MN.

[Translator comments are in brackets]

LULEÅ FROM GOTHENBURG, ARRIVED IN NEW YORK AUG. 20, 1858.				
No. Nr.	Given name Förnamn	Last name Efternamn	Parish Församling	Fa. No. milyNr.
58	JON	MOBERG	OVANÅKER	1 :01
59	ELLA	OLSDOTT. SNYGG	OVANÅKER	1 :02
60	OLOF	MOBERG	OVANÅKER	1 :03
61	CHRISTIN	MOBERG	OVANÅKER	1 :04
62	NILS GUSTAF	APPELOREN	ALFTA	69 :01
63	CATHARINA	ANDERSDOTTER	ALFTA	69 :02
64	OLOF	ANDERSSON	ALFTA	69 :03
65	CARIN	PERSDOTTER	ALFTA	69 :02
66	PER	PERSSON	ALFTA	72 :01
67	OLOF	OLSSON	OVANÅKER	9 :01
68	OLOF	ERSSON	OVANÅKER	6 :01
69	MÄRTEN	ERSSON	OVANÅKER	7 :01
70	OLOF	PERSSON BLYS	OVANÅKER	10 :01
71	CHRISTIN	ANDERSDOTTER	OVANÅKER	14 :01
72	OLOF	ANDERSSON	ALFTA	71 :01
73	MARTA MARGITA	KONSDOTTER	ALFTA	73 :01
74	CHRISTIN	PERSDOTTER	OVANÅKER	11 :01
75	MARTA MARGITA	KONSDOTTER	ALFTA	70 :01
77	NILS	NILSSON	BURÅKER	10 :01
78	ANNA (STINA)	OLSDOTTER	BURÅKER	10 :02
79	NILS	NILSSON	BURÅKER	10 :03
80	PER	PERSSON	BURÅKER	11 :01
81	ERIK	HAZELIUS	HÄSSALA	49 :01
82	GRETA	ERSDOTTER	HÄSSALA	49 :02
83	PER ERIK	HAZELIUS	HÄSSALA	49 :03
84	JON OLOF	HAZELIUS	HÄSSALA	49 :04
85	JOHAN PAULUS	HAZELIUS	HÄSSALA	49 :05
86	NILS AUGUST	HAZELIUS	HÄSSALA	49 :07
87	ALEXANDER	HAZELIUS	HÄSSALA	49 :06
88	CARL ERIK	QUIST	HÄSSALA	50 :01
89	CATHARINA	JONSDOTT. FOR.	HÄSSALA	50 :02
90	MAGDALINA	QUIST	HÄSSALA	50 :03
91	PER	WEDMARK	BURÅKER	9 :01
92	PAULUS (PÅL)	WARD (WÄRD)	STÖDE	12 :01
93	OLOF	SWING	HÄSSALA	51 :01
94	CHRISTINA	PERSDOTTER	HÄSSALA	51 :02
95	PER	NILÉN	HÄSSALA	48 :01
96	ERIK	WEDMARK	BURÅKER	12 :01
99	OLOF	LOD	BURÅKER	8 :01
100	MARGITA	PÅLSDOTTER	BURÅKER	8 :02
101	BRITA	LOD	BURÅKER	8 :03

The Passenger list for the ship *Luleå*. From *The people of the Red Barns*, by Elsa Lagevik (1996).

The first letter (Letter #1, August 12, 1858) tells of Erik's journey on the ship *Luleå*, its officers, some of his shipmates, and their arrival in America. The strong religious overtone in the letter appears in later letters also and reflects an ardent family belief in the power of God and in the hereafter, apparently developed after a family conversion to the Baptist faith earlier in the 19th century.

Here is a translation of the first letter. Since the *Luleå* didn't dock until August 20, the date of the letter was probably transposed and meant to be the 21st of August, not the 12th.

New York, August 12, 1858

Beloved Brother,

Now a Few Words. We must First Express Our Indebted Thanksgiving to God for his grace has been large. Yesterday he let us set our feet on firm ground in the new world after a successful journey at sea as well as all the way here. May God now help us to reach our goal. No danger and no sicknesses have met us the whole trip and God has richly blessed both food and drink so that we had to leave much on the ship, that which we could not take with us onto land. As soon as we came to Göteborg there was a ship ready to sail we did not need to be there longer than that. We hardly had time to get ourselves ready in one day. We came on a ship called Luleå piloted by captain Olsson from Göteborg – a responsible man as well as all our company. So, with pleasure and joy the time went fast. We were on the sea for six weeks. The passengers were from Östergötland and Småland, altogether 101 persons young and old. No one died and no one [born?], a few a little seasick.

Now I want to ask you as well as my beloved parents that you dry off the tears of longing from your cheeks and not to mourn a lost son and brother, because God helps me wonderfully. May his presence rest over you so that we can daily meet in our prayers before God. Be good now and greet my brother and sister. May

God's rich grace and help be with us all.

*[?] your devoted brothers,
Pehr and Erik Wedmark*

P.S. Ola Jonsson sends his greetings. They feel very good.

In the next eight years ten more letters follow in which Erik describes his experiences and observations about life in America.

The 2nd letter

The 2nd letter (Letter #2, October 9, 1859) was written eighteen months after his arrival in America and tells that he now works for Erik Sandman on a farm in Lansing, Iowa, and in later communications we deduce that he was probably an indentured servant since Sandman appears to have paid for Erik's travel in exchange for working for him in the new country. We find other observations by Erik about the life in America but also his ambivalence about other family members' migration to America. A segment from Letter #2 states:

"I cannot know...?...but I see that it is better here than in Sweden but there are difficulties here as in Sweden so nobody should think That here one is free from all difficulties....It is best that large families [stay?] in their countries....But I am rather happy that I am free from Sweden. [Something like: 'It is difficult to live the comfortable life? but those who trust in the Lord will not have to beg for bread.']

"I don't want to recommend anyone to come here - everyone will have to do as they like.

He asks his brother to tell him news from home and says that he is rather happy in America. *"Now I must end my short lines with a dear greeting to you and your wife. Remember me again with your letters to me. I am often with you in my dreams.*

"A dear greeting to brother Jonas and his wife. I see that you would like to [come?] here but it could happen

that it would not be much better for you since there can happen many difficulties if you come here...."

Letters #4 and #5

Erik mails two more letters home in 1860 (Letter #4 February 6, 1860, and Letter # 5 dated May 21, 1860). These letters offer us a bigger picture of his new life in America. While Erik sometimes shows a wistfulness and loneliness for his life in Sweden he, nevertheless, makes it very clear his future lies in America. He often asks about his friends and relatives in Sweden, and provides information about the activities of the Swedes that came with him to America. There is also an extensive comparison of the land in the different states that surround Iowa, though we have no knowledge of how Erik came to these conclusions. This is an excerpt from Letter #5.

"...You ask to know the nature of this country, how it is in general, if it is flat or not. Here in the State of Iowa the land is very uneven, with high knolls and small ravines, but good land and good climate and good water. There are just as good springs as in Sweden. In the State of Illinois the land is completely flat. There the climate is worse than here and less woods, but it is a fruit-bearing state. Missouri is more like Iowa but it is rather hot there during the summer. The State of Wisconsin is almost flat but with a better climate and more forests than in Illinois.

"The State of Minnesota is similar to Sweden in terms climate and forests. I cannot write about any of the other states that I have not seen. I can mention that Pehr and I were up to Minnesota this spring visiting Nils Nilsson and Olof Nilsson...."

Another letter in January 1861 (Letter #6, January, 1861) addressed to his parents, with a long note at the end to his brother details more of his life and observations about the land and the peoples in his new country. Two of his observations about the differences in religious freedoms in

the new land are offered to his parents and brother.

"...I want to mention some things about the conditions here in this country. First of all, it is a free country so that nobody is arrested for their religious beliefs but rather one and all may worship God according to their beliefs. But there are many regulations...."

Later, in the same letter he writes:

"...Doing my work here I am often thinking of you and remember the difficulties which you have to sustain yourselves. It is even difficult for me to think of how I slaved away in Sweden. I suffer when I think of how I had to work day and night for only 20 Riksdaler and a few clothes each year and that we should still be glad to get that. And workers who work like slaves still have to creep and make deep bows to the worst people. Here all people are highly respected but not equally rich. People here are rather audacious; I have heard people addressing pastors with the "du" form [i.e. informal form of 'you' instead of 'ni'] Isn't that impudent? But people here have no more respect for a pastor than for any other person...."

In the Civil War

It is a full year later before Erik sends two unusual letters home written only four days apart. The first (Letter #7, February 2, 1862) was written to his brother and the second (Letter #8, February 6, 1862) to his parents. Both letters were written on military stationery from the post at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, but neither letter makes any explicit mention about his military status. Although Erik makes reference to the Civil War and its attendant problems, he avoids writing about his own relationship to the military. Rather, the letters are filled with news about the happenings of other Swedes the family knows in Minnesota, travels of Erik and his cousin, and thoughts about future land acquisitions, etc. He signs the letter to his parents "Erik Young," a name he also used for a military enlistment and is the

name given in his military records. Here is an excerpt from Letter #8, to his parents.

Letters #8 and #9

"...But I have delayed in writing to you so that I could give you advice on what you should do about traveling here or not. I had hoped that the Civil War, which continues here, would one day end. But so far it is not over yet even though it is soon one year since it started. The word is that there will be homesteads as soon as the war is ended. Then everyone can get 160 acres of land for nothing. Both the House of Representatives and the President are working hard for this so I think it shall come to pass. That is why I have waited to acquire any land...."

From further research into military records we learn Erik actually enlisted in the Minnesota 4th Regiment in December 1861 and was a member of Company H. His enlistment occurred more than two months prior to his writing the above mentioned letters to his brother and parents.

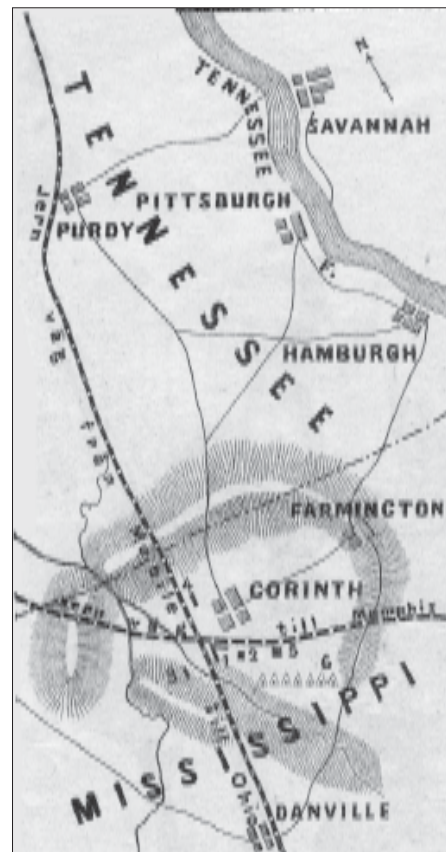
Almost another year passes before we hear from Erik again but this time much has happened in his brief military history. Written in December, 1862, (Letter #9, December 2, 1862) this lengthy letter spells out the regiment's movement down the Mississippi River on flatboats and eventual station at Corinth, Mississippi, a major railhead for the South, and Erik's participation in an early firefight, his subsequent illness, discharge, and return to Iowa. Excerpts of the translated letter tell us, in vivid detail, his military experiences, his illness, his thoughts and fears, and eventual return to Iowa. A long excerpt from Letter #9 follows.

"...My parents, I hope you wish to know how it is with me and how things stand in this land. As you know, I enlisted as a soldier in Minnesota in the beginning of December, 1861. The enlistment is for three years or until the war is over. The war is not over yet. I cannot say anything regarding that; there is in any event

no such hope yet. I must let you know, however, that I am a Free Soldier which I think you will be glad to hear. I became sick and had to be in the hospital most all of the summer but I did not have to pay for any of it since the government is taking care of the sick in the hospitals. You can believe that there are many sick and wounded."

[A note written on the side of page one said.] *"It is better that you are home in such times, and for as long as the war continues I think."*

"I became sick in the beginning of June and was in a slave state called Mississippi. I was then taken to a little hospital which held 300 soldiers. I was there two weeks and during that time 200 died. I was then moved to a general hospital; there were over 2,000 [Eight to eleven people died daily while I was there?] I was there over a month before being moved to another state which was more healthy. I belonged to the Minnesota 4th Regiment Company. In that company were 11 Swedes and 11 Norwegians, the rest were Germans or Americans. We were in Minnesota until the beginning of April. Then we



went to a slave state in the south, about fifteen hundred English miles. We made the whole trip on steam boats. On the 29th and 30th of May I was involved in a battle and we took a city called Corinth.”

[Translators note: Corinth is on the Mississippi-Tennessee border. This was a strategic rail center during the Civil War, and was captured by H. W. Halleck's Union troops after the battle of Shiloh in May, 1862, and was defended by General Rosecrans against the Confederates under Generals Van Dorn and Price, Oct. 3-4, 1862.]

“We took 10,000 prisoners and a lot of fire [?]. If we had an insistent General we could have taken their whole camp. And if the North would have had [devoted?] generals the war would have been over. But they want the war to last for many years because they have large salaries. Now, finally, the oldest general has been relieved of his post, and we have another. We'll see if he is any better. The war continues just as horribly as before with no hope for an end. But I thank my God that I made it out uninjured from there. There were many dead and wounded. You can believe that there are many crippled in this country which you can understand from such a long-lasting war. I took my departure from the life of soldier at the end of October; I was by then rather well enough to go to my regiment but the doctor said that if I was going to go back I could get worse. Then he let me go with several others to where we wanted. The North has over a million soldiers in this theater of war and in that respect the South is rather strong too. At the place where I was we had 290,000? soldiers and the South had not more than 150,000. Our regiment was not in the center of battle that time, however. During both days of battle there was the thundering of cannons and bullets continually flew over our heads and always shouted 'Not You.' I do not want to talk more about this as I can myself see how it [must sound?].

“My parents, I think of you often and perhaps it has been your thoughts to count me among the dead as you have not heard from me. For almost a year I have thought about

informing you of my condition. But, it has remained undone. I arrived here three weeks ago from the South and am for the time being here. [E. Sanderass?] they are both living still and have their health. But how long I'll be here I don't know. I'm thinking of going up to Minnesota or west in Iowa, but if that will happen before spring I cannot say now. I have not heard anything about Nils Nilsson since last winter when I had a letter from them. It has been said that they had to flee their homes, everyone who lived in the area and they had to leave everything behind. [?] (They) had pictures of the so-called Indians.[?] These wild ones took to destroying [?] they even came to Minnesota. I know of 19 Swedes who were [killed?] by the above mentioned and they did considerable damage, until they caught up with the military which drove them away from here.

“I do not know anything about Peter Peterson. I had heard that he was supposed to be married, but probably not since I have heard that he is a soldier in the Minnesota 3rd Regiment. I'm unable to confirm the truth in this however. Anders Larson and his wife are in good health and have two children and Brita and her husband have one child. Lars Widmark is nearby and he has rented land for next summer. He had been sick for awhile but is now better. His brother is in the vicinity. Both send their greetings to you. Everything is expensive here from food to livestock. There are large [costs/expenses?] on the land and on everything so it is better not to have any land in such times as the war demands money....”

Back to civil life

Following his return to civilian life, Erik wrote several more letters to his family in Sweden as he tried to find a place to settle down. Subsequent letters were written from Lansing, Iowa (Letter # 11, February 16, 1864), MacGregor, Iowa (Letter # 12, April 6, 1866) and the final letter from Red Wing, Minnesota (Letter # 13, undated). Although the letters cease in 1866 we know from ad-



Erik in his Swedish uniform.

ditional sources that Erik eventually settled in Shell Lake, Wisconsin, area where he died in 1919.

One of the most recent, humorous byproducts of this genealogical research was the picture of Erik in a military uniform, present in several family archives was assumed to be a picture of Erik in his Civil War uniform. It was not until 2006, however, that two Civil War re-enactors informed this author the uniform was not that of an enlisted Union soldier during the Civil War. After other authorities verified our misconception, the Swedish Military Museum advised us the uniform worn by Erik was that of Swedish conscripts in the 1850's, and he was probably part of a Helsing regiment. This, of course, indicates that Erik also had some Swedish military history prior to his immigration. That investigation is for another time and place.

During the period of 1910 - 1919, in his later years, Erik would come to the Aitken, MN, area to visit his younger sister, Anna Klöfverstedt, who had immigrated to America in

1900. She was then in her 60s living with her adult children and grandchildren. It was on these visits that this author's mother, her sisters, and brothers were able to meet their "great uncle Erik" By then he was an elderly, somewhat portly, gentleman who would walk from the railroad station to their home and give them loose change from his pockets. He apparently gave his niece, Emma Klöfverstedt \$100 on the birth of her twins, Herbert and Robert in 1918, and his sister, Anna, money for a new church organ.

Erik in the later censuses

In a special military census of 1890 Erik is recorded living in Spooner Township, Washburne County, Wisconsin under the name Alec Johnson. The 1900 United States Census shows Erik using this name, Alex Johnson, also living in Spooner township (later changed to Crystal Township), Washburne County, Wisconsin. In the census he identifies himself as single, 66 years of age, born in Sweden. Because dates of immigration and military history given by this, Alex Johnson correspond exactly with that of Erik Wedmark, we know it is the correct person. There is no record however that Erik was ever naturalized as an American citizen.

Military pension records show that Erik did not apply for his Civil War pension until July 22, 1907. His pension records use the name Eric Young, the name used in his military enlistment and many of his letters. His first pension checks were \$12 a month until June of 1909 when they increased to \$15. In June of 1915 the pension was raised to \$22.50 a month, and later increased to \$32 month in June 1918.

Erik's obituary

Erik died Nov. 10, 1919. An obituary for Erik Young was located in the *Washburne County (Wisconsin) Register* of November 15, 1919, by his great nephew, Robert Holmbeck.

"Erik Young, better known as Alex Johnson, passed away at the Lakeview Hotel where he was staying & was buried in the cemetery north of town. Erik was a veteran of the Civil War. He was taken from the fever tents on the field in Alabama, brought to Quincy, Illinois, and was there for some time, before regaining consciousness. Although discharged for disability and entitled to a pension from that time he did not look for one until a few years ago. He was long an employee of the St. Croix lumber company and followed camp life in the woods for years.

"He was a good honest man."

WASHBURNE COUNTY REGISTER, VOL. 31, *Shell Lake Register*, Shell Lake, Wisc., Nov 15, 1919, No. 30.

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5. Letter #4 Erik to his brother Pehr. *Ibid.*
6. Letter #5 Erik to his parents, Jonas and Brita Wedmark. *Ibid.*
7. Letter #6. Erik to his parents, Jonas and Brita and brother Pehr. *Ibid.*
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9. Letter #8. Erik to his parents, Jonas and Brita Wedmark. *Ibid.*
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16. Photograph of Erik in a military uniform. Family archives.
17. Ship Arrivals. List of passengers arriving in New York on ship *Luleå*, August 20, 1858. Microfilm #1224712. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

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A Union soldier from Illustrerad Tidning 1862.